A LifeCare® Guide

Helping Children Cope With Grief

When children lose a loved one, like adults, they must work through their grief, but they must do so with greater limits on their level of understanding and less developed coping skills. While it was once believed that children "got over" their grief relatively quickly, it is now believed that their sadness and grief is a process that they experience differently as they age and mature. This guide discusses how children respond to death, and how to support and guide a grieving child through the grief process in a healthy way.

"My daughter's best friend, Lindsay, recently lost her mother to cancer," says Eleanor. "We are very close—Lindsay is like another daughter to me. Although she is being brave, I know that she is going through a very difficult time. How can I let her know that it's okay to cry and support her while she grieves?"

How Children Respond to Death

A child's developmental level will influence the way he or she understands death and expresses grief. Over the course of childhood, children develop an understanding of the abstract concepts of death and all of the related beliefs. The following information outlines the responses to loss that can be expected, depending on a child's age. *Note*—Although these are typical responses, everyone responds to grief in different ways. The child you know may not fit these descriptions at these ages.

Infants and Toddlers (Ages Birth to Two Years)

While infants will not understand the death of a loved one, their behavior may be affected by changes in routine or the grief of others around them. Common reactions may include fussiness; clinginess; disrupted sleep patterns; and physical reactions such as biting, hitting or pushing to express frustration and confusion. Around the age of two, a child may start to show a slight comprehension of the loss, but his or her reaction will tend to be egocentric (in relation to him or herself).

Preschoolers (Ages Three to Five Years)

Preschoolers typically have a poor sense of time and permanence and may view death as reversible. They may think death is the same as going to sleep and may suddenly fear nighttime, getting ready for bed or falling asleep. Preschoolers may experience confusion, bad dreams and general agitation. Regression in the form of thumbsucking, bed-wetting and tantrums may also occur. Misunderstandings about what death is are common; preschoolers may ask repeated questions with little understanding of the answers. Sometimes a child at this age will worry intensely that someone else close to him or her will die soon.

School-Aged Children (Ages Six to 12 Years)

Younger school-aged children tend to understand death in a more concrete way. This is around the age where children will come to understand that death is final. They may become very interested in the process of death, wondering, for example, what happens to the body after death or asking repeated questions about the deceased. Children are now capable of suffering from sorrow, anger and denial, but they still may not view death as something that can happen to them. Younger school-aged children may attempt to avoid emotional pain at all costs; they may play, act silly or become easily distracted whenever the deceased is spoken of.

Older school-aged children are generally mature enough to know something is wrong when a death occurs. They understand that death is final and irreversible, and it can happen to anyone, including them. The child may reach out to you or other adults for help in dealing with intense feelings, or he or she may become withdrawn, quiet or irritable—often a sign that he or she is fearful of loss or change. Children may also become self-conscious about expressing their feelings, or they may cover up the grief by joking about the experience. This may signal that they are confused about what to say or how to act.

Teens (Ages 13 to 18 Years)

Teens understand death much like adults, but they have fewer coping skills. Because teens are already struggling to find their own voice and identity, the death of a friend or loved one may leave them feeling more bewildered and confused. They may not be emotionally ready to deal with the death alone, yet they may struggle or refuse to share feelings or ask advice from parents or other adults.

Supporting a Grieving Child

If the child who is experiencing grief is under the age of two, maintain his or her routine as much as possible while providing plenty of love, reassurance, play and comfort. For children of other ages, it is important to communicate about the loss within age-appropriate guidelines—as much as you truthfully and honestly can. Children have vivid imaginations and will create their own answers when factual information is lacking. The more accurate and direct information you can give a child (depending on his or her age), the better off he or she will be.

Talking to a Child About Death

You may have already talked generally about death with the child who is grieving, but if not, a good place to start may be to borrow from nature. Most children have already been exposed to the death of birds, squirrels or pets; even flowers and plants die with the change of seasons. You may want to use these situations as examples to help explain death and its universality. When you speak to the child, choose your specific wording based on his or her age. Consider the following suggestions:

- **All living creatures are born and at some time must die.** Explain that nothing lives forever. There is birth, there is life and there is death for all living creatures.
- **Depending on your spiritual or religious beliefs, address the concept that only the body dies.** Explain what you believe happens to the soul, spirit or energy that makes each person unique. Explaining, for example, that the soul of the loved one is now in a loving, peaceful place may bring a great deal of comfort to the child.
- **Explain that death is permanent.** For young children, explain that this means the person or animal will never come back. The child may not have developed an understanding of time and permanence yet and may not be able to fully understand this concept; it may need a lot of reinforcement.
- **Explain that dying is not like sleeping.** Sometimes people compare the two because a dead body looks very peaceful, the way a sleeping person looks, but in all other ways it's completely different and can cause confusion for a child struggling to understand. Help the child understand the difference: We sleep to make our bodies strong and healthy, but when we die our bodies stop working altogether. Avoid statements like, "He died in his sleep." This may make the child fear going to sleep. Instead, be specific when you talk about the death. For example, say, "Grandpa died from cancer (or Alzheimer's, a stroke, etc.). He was very sick for a long time."

Helping a Child Cope With Grief

Make it clear to the grieving child that you are willing to talk about what is going on, and how he or she feels about it. Otherwise, the child may be left emotionally alone to cope with the loss. Give the child permission to grieve and ask questions about your experience with grief, if applicable. Many children need help learning the skills to manage their intense feelings of grief. Don't be afraid to discuss painful issues with a child for fear of crying in front of him or her. Not only is it okay to cry in front of children, it is a good example of how strong feelings are expressed and managed, and can be a good opportunity to talk about feelings.

It is important, however, to let a child know he or she is not responsible for taking care of you or any other adult. If you hide tears or emotions, a child can usually sense your pain and may try to protect you by not crying or asking questions that he or she thinks might upset you. Make simple statements like, "I'm sad because I'm going to miss Grandma. Sometimes it makes me feel better to cry. I know you are sad, too. I bet you feel like crying sometimes." This lets the child know honestly how you feel, and shows him or her that it's okay to express feelings. Here are some additional tips to help a child cope with grief:

- **Continue routines to help the child feel secure.** Adjusting to the loss of a loved one is often significantly life-altering for a child. To reduce the child's stress, try to continue daily patterns and routines. For instance, if the child is used to taking a nightly bath and then reading a story before going to bed, try to continue this routine.
- **Encourage the child to keep memories alive.** Children can keep memories alive by reminiscing with family and friends, placing a picture of the loved one next to their bed, creating a scrapbook with photos or remembrances, or keeping a favorite gift from the loved one nearby. By helping the child remember, he or she will see that a loved one will not be forgotten after death.
- **Continue to mention the person who died.** Children take their cues from parents and other adults. If a child gets the message that a loved one is not to be talked about, he or she will be left alone with his or her feelings, questions and fears.

Reading age appropriate books on death and loss with your child is a good way to help your child cope with grief—and show that you are there to support him or her emotionally. There are many books available on loss. See the "Suggested Reading" list at the end of this guide or visit your local library.

- **Be careful about using statements like, "Now he (or she) is happy."** These may suggest to a child that the loved one is better off or was glad to leave him or her. Children need to know that, while a loved one now is out of pain or distress, their parent, sibling or friend didn't want to leave.
- **Talk with older children (generally over age three) about the funeral, wake or other memorial service**, and gently encourage them to join in. Children want to be included in major family and life events, especially if they have accurate information about what to expect.

Tip—An open casket may be frightening to many young children. If a child doesn't want to attend the funeral event, respect and support that choice. Talk to the child about participating in some other way, such as making something to put in the casket—a card, picture or letter—or planning a time in the future to visit the gravesite or memorial marker.

- **Remember that children do not usually sustain painful emotions for long periods of time.** Young children typically express feelings of sadness or anger for a brief period of time, then run off to play. This does not mean the child has already forgotten or is minimally affected by the loss. It is simply the child's way of signaling that he or she has had all the pain he or she can tolerate for a period of time. The child will probably return to his or her feelings, questions or desire to participate in grief-related events later.
- **Understand how children work through their feelings.** Children work through their feelings in play, and express them through behavior. Don't be alarmed if a child is expressing a great deal of sadness or anger while playing, as long as he or she is not harmful to him or herself or others.

A child's feelings may only become a problem if they do not have the appropriate outlet. However, if the child is getting into fights with peers, breaking things or engaging in any other destructive behaviors, the child probably needs more support, and needs help finding constructive ways to channel his or her painful feelings. If this is the case, consider seeking professional help.

- **Help children understand their feelings.** Following a death, children may have difficulty understanding their emotions. Help grieving children know that their feelings are normal, even though they are unfamiliar. By helping children identify their feelings, you encourage them to build coping tools that will grow over time. For example, if a child is irritable or argumentative, tell him or her, "I know you feel angry that your mom died. It doesn't seem fair, does it? You know, I feel angry sometimes, too." Or, "I know you're sad; so am I. Sometimes when I'm sad, I cry. Do you?"
- **Anticipate and address the child's fears.** Children, like adults, often feel vulnerable after the death of a loved one. Avoid empty reassurances. Rather than promising that nothing bad will ever happen to you or other adults and friends, stress that people are here now to care for him or her. Invite the child to talk about his or her fears and acknowledge that it feels scary to have someone die. Maintain daily routines as much as possible to help the child re-establish a sense of safety.
- **Build a support system.** It is important that a child's teacher, child care provider and/or other adults know about his or her loss and what to expect. Caregivers should be told that the child will probably need extra attention and care. They may also see regressive behavior (i.e., whining, thumb sucking, clinging, etc.).

Seeking Professional Help for a Grieving Child

Expect changes in any child for a while after the death of a loved one or friend, but if the child is having difficulty managing his or her grief, talk to a professional therapist or counselor. The child's doctor, a clergy member and/or local hospices can refer you to counselors and resources in the area that specialize in dealing with children and grief. The following signs may indicate that a child may need extra help:

- **Prolonged physical changes**—If a child experiences sleep disruptions or appetite changes leading to weight loss or gain that persist beyond the first few months after the death, seek help from the child's doctor.
- **Prolonged behavior changes**—If a child is exhibiting disruptive behavior or behavior that is noticeably better than normal (e.g., a loud, overly active child suddenly becomes a quiet, reserved child after the death of a loved one), talk to the child's doctor and his or her caregivers and teachers.
- **Marked withdrawal from peer groups**—If, beyond the first few months after a death, the child is no longer interacting with friends the way he or she did prior to the death (refusing to call friends, declining invitations to play, preferring to be at home alone, etc.), he or she may need extra attention and help coping with the loss.

For school-aged children and adolescents, school can be a place where they can resume their "normal" life. It can also pose some difficulties. Because grief often causes difficulty with concentration, schoolwork may become particularly difficult. If necessary, talk to the grieving child's teacher about temporarily decreasing demands, and letting him or her take breaks to go to a counselor, school nurse or some other designated individual. Typically, children will not use this as a "crutch," as is sometimes feared; they want to be like their peers, and will likely resume a normal workload as soon as they are able. If, after a few months, the child is still having difficulty, talk to his or her teacher, guidance counselor or pediatrician about professional counseling.

- **Little or no emotional response to the loss**—If you see no reaction whatsoever from a child, as if the death never occurred, the child is probably using an excessive amount of energy to ward off his or her feelings. He or she may need help from you, other adults and possibly from a professional to manage the grief.
- **Marked change in health status**—If a child is suddenly sick a lot, the illnesses may be a response to emotional stress. The child may need help expressing his or her grief directly, and may benefit from talking with a counselor or attending a children's grief support group.
- **Thoughts of suicide**—If a child says anything about not wanting to live, wishing he or she were dead or wanting to join the deceased, always treat this as a serious statement of pain and a need for more attention and support. Even if you think the child is just trying to get attention, don't ignore these statements or minimize their seriousness. Self-destructive behavior, such as alcohol use, drug use or risky stunts, should be treated similarly. If he or she is ignored, the child may take more severe action to get the attention and help he or she needs.

Finally, remember to listen to the child and encourage him or her to express his or her feelings, whatever those feelings are. You may not always know what the child is feeling, but if you can provide a secure, positive environment where he or she feels listened to, protected and loved, then you are giving a grieving child the best possible support. Additionally, you may want to contact the organizations listed in the following "Helpful Resources" section.

Helpful Resources

American Self-Help Clearinghouse
100 E. Hanover Avenue, Suite 202
Cedar Knolls, NJ 07927-2020
973-326-6789
http://www.mentalhealth.net/selfhelp/
This national organization provides information on local self-help group clearinghouses worldwide, which can help you find and form bereavement self-help groups. The American Self-Help Clearinghouse also provides free consultation on starting new self-help groups.

The Compassionate Friends
PO Box 3696
Oak Brook, IL 60522-3696
877-969-0010 (toll-free)
630-990-0010
http://www.compassionatefriends.org
A national, nonprofit, self-help support organization that offers friendship and understanding to families who are grieving the death of a child of any age, from any cause.

GriefNet
http://griefnet.org
GriefNet is an online system that can connect you with a variety of resources related to death, dying, bereavement and major emotional and physical losses. It offers information and online discussion and support groups for bereaved persons and those working with the bereaved, both professional and lay persons.

Growth House, Inc.
http://growthhouse.org
This web site is an international gateway to resources for life-threatening illness and end-of-life care. Growth House's primary mission is to improve the quality of compassionate care for people who are dying. The site also provides information on helping family members cope with grief and bereavement.

Suggested Reading

Books for Children

Annie and the Old One, by Miska Miles. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1971.

This is the story of Annie, a Navajo child, set against a background of Navajo traditions and contemporary Indian life. When Annie's grandmother tells her that when Annie's mother's rug is completely woven that the grandmother will die, Annie tries to hold back time by unweaving the rug in secret.

Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children, by Bryan Melloine and Robert Ingpen. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1983.

This moving book for children of all ages and their parents explains life and death in a sensitive and caring way. It talks about beginnings, endings and about living in between.

Nana Upstairs, Nana Downstairs, by Tomie dePaola. New York: Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 2000.

Recommended for children aged five to eight, this book shows the love between a child and grandparent, and pictures the child's adjustment to death. In a quietly touching story, the author-illustrator depicts loving family relationships so that even a very young reader can understand the concept.

The New King, by Doreen Rappaport. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1995.

When young Prince Rakoto is told of his father's death, he cannot accept it. The new king gives his first orders to his royal advisors: "Bring my father back to life!" When they are unable to do so, Rakoto then goes to the Wise Woman who tells him an enthralling tale that helps him begin to accept what has happened.

Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How to Cope With Losing Someone You Love, by Earl Grollman. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.

This book is for teenagers who have lived through the death of a friend or relative. Grollman discusses normal reactions to the shock of death; how grief can affect relationships; how participating in a funeral can help; how to survive birthdays and anniversaries; and how to work through grief and begin to live again. This book also includes a journal section where readers can record memories, feelings and hopes.

The Tenth Good Thing About Barney, by Judith Viorst. New York: Aladdin Books, 1971.

Narrated by a child whose cat, Barney, has just died, the author succinctly and honestly handles both the emotions stemming from the loss of a beloved pet and the questions about the finality of death that arise in such a situation.

When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing, by Marilyn Gootman. Minneapolis, Minn.: Free Spirit Publishing Inc., 1994.

This book is for young adults grieving the death of a friend. The author watched her own children suffer from the death of a friend, and here she shares her teenagers' experiences. This book offers help to cope with sadness as well as genuine understanding, gentle advice and compassionate wisdom to guide teenagers through the days, weeks or months surrounding a death.

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death, by Laura Krasny Brown and Mark Brown. Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1996.

For children ages four through eight, this book uses simple language to explain the feelings people may have regarding the death of a loved one and ways to honor the memory of someone who has died.

Books for Adults Who Are Helping a Grieving Child

Guiding Your Child Through Grief, by Mary Ann Enswiler and James P. Enswiler. New York: Bantam Books, 2000.

This caring and compassionate guide offers expert advice on helping a child grieve the death of a parent or sibling. This book helps readers understand the many secret ways children grieve, changes in family dynamics after a loss, ways to communicate with children about death and more.

How Do We Tell the Children: A Step-by-Step Guide for Helping Children Two to Teen Cope When Someone Dies, by Dan Schaefer & Christine Lyons. New York: Newmarket Press, 2002.

Drawing on more than three decades of experience helping families in crises, the author provides valuable information for adults to help them understand what children are capable of understanding about the loss of a loved one and how they can help them cope.

When Children Grieve, by John W. James and Russell Friedman. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.

Watching a child grieve can be a difficult experience for parents, teachers, and caregivers. This book offers guidelines for helping children develop a lifelong, healthy response to loss, including death, divorce, pet loss, moving and more.

Note—This reading list is not intended to be entirely comprehensive since new books are being published constantly. Visit your library or local bookstore for new and noteworthy titles.

This LifeCare® Guide is for general informational purposes only and is not intended to provide any reader with specific authority, advice or recommendations.

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